



Issue Brief No. 42

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## Afterschool: Providing Multiple Benefits to Middle School Students

*The Afterschool Alliance, in partnership with MetLife Foundation, is proud to present the first in a series of four issue briefs examining critical issues facing middle school youth and the vital role afterschool programs play in addressing these issues. These issue briefs feature: the multiple benefits of afterschool for middle school youth; STEM; pathways to higher education and careers; and health and wellness for pre-teens and teens. They examine just a few of the ways afterschool programs support middle school youth, families and communities.*

Afterschool programs across the country provide critically needed services to our nation's children and families; however, many afterschool providers find it difficult to serve youth once they enter middle school. Young adolescents offer afterschool providers a special set of challenges which they must overcome in order to attract and retain participants. For example, young adolescents are more autonomous, busier, better able and more likely to articulate specific needs, and less appeased by activities designed for a general audience. While youth in grades six through eight can clearly benefit from participation in afterschool, programs must recognize the needs of these youth and employ innovative strategies to attract and keep them engaged.

### Middle School Youth Have Specific Needs

Developmental diversity is the central characteristic of early adolescence. Because of the wide variations in "normal" growth rates during puberty, there may be a six-to-eight-year span in physical development among any group of young adolescents of the same chronological age.<sup>i</sup> This translates to a wide range of challenges, skills and needs – all within the same age group.<sup>ii</sup> Needs specific to this age group include:<sup>iii</sup>

- **Physical activity:** Young teens need time to stretch, wiggle and exercise their rapidly growing bodies. They also need downtime to relax.
- **Competence and Achievement:** Because young teens are extraordinarily self-conscious about their changing selves, they hunger for chances to do something well and prove themselves. They need to know that what they do is valued by others whom they respect.
- **Self-Definition:** Young adolescents need chances to consider what it means to become an adult and to belong to a particular ethnic or cultural group. They need opportunities to explore their widening world so they can begin to consider themselves as participants in society.
- **Creative Expression:** Opportunities to creatively express thoughts, feelings, interests and abilities help young teens understand and accept themselves. Performing and being exposed to drama, literature and musical works of others help them see that people before them have experienced similar thoughts and emotions. Middle school youth can also creatively express themselves through sports, different art mediums and other hands-on activities.

- **Positive Social Interactions with Peers and Adults:** Parents and families remain primary sources of values and affection. Peers offer support, companionship and criticism. In addition, adults other than parents have an effect on the lives of young adolescents who are eager to understand the possibilities of adulthood. Young adolescents need relationships with adults who are willing to share their own experiences, views, values and feelings. These adults also encourage young adolescents to develop positive peer relationships.
- **Structure and Clear Limits:** Young adolescents live in a society of rules, and they want to know and understand their own limits within that system. Clear expectations are crucial to unsure, self-critical young people. Their search for security in a world of conflicting demands is helped by explicit boundaries that define the areas in which they may legitimately explore. They differ from younger children though, in that they are increasingly capable of participating with adults in framing their own rules and limits.
- **Meaningful Participation:** Youth need to participate in activities that shape their lives. Successful events are planned with, not for, young adolescents. As they develop a mature appearance and more sophisticated social and intellectual skills, they want opportunities to use their new talents. By learning that their actions can affect the world around them, they gain a sense of responsibility. Adults can help young adolescents see themselves as citizens by providing opportunities for them to make meaningful contributions to their programs and their communities. Adults need to adapt responsibilities to the short-term attention spans of early adolescents and to select varied tasks that enlist diverse interests and abilities.

### **Middle School Youth and Their Families Need Afterschool**

Most families with children in the U.S. today need some type of afterschool services. The parents of 28 million children work outside the home. Despite this need, the demand for quality afterschool programs is far from being met. Nearly 4 million middle school youth (grades six through eight) are unsupervised afterschool.<sup>iv</sup> The conventional wisdom is that by the time children reach middle school, they are old enough to take care of themselves and adult supervision is not as critical as it was when they were in elementary school. However, if left to their own devices, these young adolescents might not make the best use of the free time they have after school. In spite of the autonomy they may be given, middle school age youth need guidance and adult supervision to help keep them safe, engaged in school, and on the path to success in life.

### **Despite Clear Rewards, Barriers to Participation Exist**

Typically, young children participate in afterschool programs for the enrichment opportunities as well as to satisfy their family's child care needs while parents are at work. However, although young adolescents need mentoring, enrichment and guidance in a positive social environment, participation in afterschool programs declines when children transition from elementary school to middle school.<sup>v</sup>

Common barriers to afterschool participation by middle school youth include:

- *Disinterest/ Boredom:* Twenty-five percent of older youth afterschool participants drop out of their programs within two months citing disinterest in the activities.<sup>vi</sup>
- *The "Relax" Factor:* Sixty-five percent of afterschool nonparticipants say that they prefer to simply hang out afterschool rather than extend their learning day.<sup>vii</sup>

- *Family Responsibilities:* Twenty percent of youth not currently participating in an afterschool program report that family responsibilities prevent them from attending afterschool programs.<sup>viii</sup>
- *Transportation:* Many youth face difficulties in finding transportation to and from afterschool facilities. Forty-nine percent of parents of afterschool nonparticipants say that transportation is the main reason their child does not participate in afterschool programs.<sup>ix</sup>
- *Financial Constraints:* The resources for afterschool programs for older youth simply do not exist in many communities.<sup>x</sup>

Fortunately, many programs overcome these hurdles and for those that do, the potential impact goes far beyond the widely recognized benefit of providing safe, supervised environments in the hours after school. Below we highlight a few of the ways that afterschool benefits middle school students along with a program that is successfully meeting the needs of middle schoolers.

In addition to facing more demanding academics, middle school youth are dealing with the challenge of meeting social and emotional benchmarks as they transition from elementary to middle and middle to high school. Afterschool programs can provide an avenue for helping students successfully navigate these challenges while building skills necessary toward success in the community and in school.<sup>xi</sup>

- **The Learning Through an Expanded Arts Program, Inc. (LeAP)** at the Jordan L. Mott School CIS 22 in the Bronx, New York serves economically disadvantaged and culturally underserved middle school youth, providing afterschool arts-based instruction, community service activities, tutoring, and mentoring. The program uses all genres of art as well as the written word to engage students in creative pursuits, academic success and creative development. The program builds students' art skills; increases their involvement and attendance in school; builds confidence and creativity; prevents violence in school and out; and helps students forge positive relationships with peers and adult role-models.

*Using the LeAP model of incorporating hands-on, arts-based approaches to teaching, and extending the standard curriculum, has definitely made a positive impact on student achievement.*  
**– Jim Pugliese – Director, LeAP Afterschool at 22**

Afterschool programs can incorporate leadership opportunities while supporting young adolescents in academics and in their social/emotional development.

- **Cypress Hills/East New York (CHENY) Beacon** afterschool program at Intermediate School 302 in Brooklyn, New York engages middle school students in a multipronged path to leadership development. In addition to homework assistance, arts and sports programming and snacks, participants register for one of three service groups. In Heirs 2 the Community, students design and implement a series of three to four service projects in the community. Intergenerational Services Program engages youth in service to local seniors. Leaders-in-Training offers middle school youth the opportunity to play leadership roles with younger children. All participants who successfully complete their service groups are then eligible for the counselor-in-training program in the high school.

As middle school youth gain more independence, it is important for them to learn to make responsible choices for themselves and their community.

- **America SCORES** in Chicago, Illinois offers middle school students soccer, leadership and healthy lifestyle training, literacy/creative writing workshops; and service learning activities. The varied components of the program reinforce and rely on each other – active participation in all aspects of the program is expected and required in order to be part of the soccer team. The “poet-athletes” learn to make healthy choices, and learn firsthand their power to impact their community.

*I have seen students go from being very shy, but once they start the program become different people. If the students aren't doing well in class they now have a motivation to stay on the team.*

– **Coach Dean, America SCORES**

Successful afterschool programs for middle school youth actively engage and empower youth – allowing them to choose which activities to participate in, and how to take advantage of available resources.

*Being a parent of a participant of SNBC activities, I see first hand the positive effects the programs, activities and staff have had on my son. SNBC is a true Sunset District gem!*  
– **Terry Gutierrez, Parent**

- **The Sunset Neighborhood Beacon Center’s (SNBC) Afterschool Program** in San Francisco, California provides social and academic supports. Each day, students engage in project-based learning activities (“clubs”) as well as recreation and service learning. Youth in the program choose which club to join. Examples of clubs include newsletter and movie making, cartoon and anime, urban music, peer resources and leadership, urban dance, and flash animation. Clubs integrate the most up-to-date audio, video and computing technology as well as promote community engagement and leadership opportunities for maximum youth interest and motivation.

Afterschool programs can offer critically needed supports during a time of transitions in a young adolescent’s life.

- **ZONE 3** in Doraville, Georgia, outside of Atlanta, reaches out to middle school minority youth from low-income families who are at risk for becoming involved in criminal and/or dangerous behavior in an area known for gang activity. The program aims to not only to decrease exposure to gang activity, but also to increase academic achievement, consciousness of community issues, knowledge of career and life choice potentials and knowledge of human and civil rights. Youth are provided a safe space to receive tutoring and homework assistance, and engage in community service, field trips and enrichment activities.

Afterschool programs can offer young adolescents the opportunity to design their own programs and choose enriching activities that allow them to have fun, learn, and give them ownership of their out of school time in a safe and supervised environment.

- **Teen Recreation Activities Program (TRAP)** in Dubois, Wyoming provides enrichment programming for middle school youth every day after school and during the summer. DuBois is a small rural community with limited available services and only 190 school aged youth. TRAP is a direct result of focus group meetings made up of middle school youth who designed the afterschool program. Activities include a young entrepreneurs program, STEM programs, and mentoring. Because of the limited resources available to the community, TRAP provides these youth with critical experiences and support that they would not otherwise have.

## Conclusion

Middle school youth have a unique set of social, emotional and academic needs, and afterschool successfully weaves these together, using enriching and engaging activities to support the whole child. Afterschool offers multiple benefits to these young adolescents, but only if the barriers to participation are removed, and youth are given the opportunity to meaningfully participate.

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<sup>i</sup> North Carolina Area Health Education Centers Program: Health Careers and Minority Workforce Development Council (1996). *Guide for Working with Adolescents. Preceptor/Mentor Handbook*. Chapel Hill.

<sup>ii</sup> Kerewsky, W. and Lefstein, L.M. (1982). “Young Adolescents and Their Communities: A Shared Responsibility.” Carrboro. University of North Carolina Press.

<sup>iii</sup> North Carolina Area Health Education Centers Program: Health Careers and Minority Workforce Development Council (1996). *Guide for Working with Adolescents. Preceptor/Mentor Handbook*. Chapel Hill.

<sup>iv</sup> Afterschool Alliance (2010) *America After 3PM*. Washington, D.C.

<sup>v</sup> Lauver, S., Little, P.M.D., & Weiss, H.B. (July 2004). Moving beyond the barriers: Attracting and sustaining youth participation in out-of-school time programs. *Harvard Family Research Project*, 6. Retrieved March 21, 2009 from [www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/resources/issuebrief6.html](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/resources/issuebrief6.html).

<sup>vi</sup> U.S. Department of Education. (2003). *When schools stay open late: The national evaluation of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program*. Washington, DC: Author. Available at [www.ed.gov/pubs/21cent/firstyear/index.html](http://www.ed.gov/pubs/21cent/firstyear/index.html).

<sup>vii</sup> Lauver, S., Little, P.M.D., & Weiss, H.B. (July 2004). Moving beyond the barriers: Attracting and sustaining youth participation in out-of-school time programs. *Harvard Family Research Project*, 6. Retrieved June 9, 2010, from [www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/resources/issuebrief6.html](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/resources/issuebrief6.html).

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>ix</sup> Lauver, S., Little, P.M.D., & Weiss, H.B. (July 2004). Moving beyond the barriers: Attracting and sustaining youth participation in out-of-school time programs. *Harvard Family Research Project*, 6. Retrieved June 9, 2010 from [www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/resources/issuebrief6.html](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/resources/issuebrief6.html).

<sup>x</sup> Afterschool Alliance (2009). *Leveraging Out-of-School Learning to Boost High School Success: A Proposed Federal Investment*. Washington, D.C.

<sup>xi</sup> Jones, W. “Motivating Middle School Students to Attend Afterschool Programs”. SEDL Letter, April 2008 *Making the Most of Afterschool*. Retrieved on January 28, 2010 from [www.sedl.org/pubs/sedl-letter/v20n01/motivating.html](http://www.sedl.org/pubs/sedl-letter/v20n01/motivating.html).